

The Apophatic in Orthodox Theology

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It is readily agreed, perhaps too readily agreed—both by Orthodox and non-Orthodox—that Orthodox theology is “apophatic,” that it proceeds by denial rather than by affirmation. The Roman Catholic priest Joseph Famerée, very much a friend of Orthodoxy, asserts, “So, it is by indicating what God is not that the theologian most truly teaches. God is above any human word or thought. Eastern theology is, as such, negative or apophatic.”¹ And yet, no less an authoritative father than Saint Gregory the Theologian asserts that “an inquirer into the nature of a real being cannot stop short at saying what is *not* but must add to his denials a positive affirmation” (*Or.* 28.9). We must, I think, be circumspect.

The notion of the apophatic is manifold. It can be grammatical, which is more or less the sense in which Aristotle uses it (in *De Interpretatione* 6, 8, and 10, principally), but it can be more ambitious: it can be epistemological, referring to what we can and cannot come to know; it can also be ontological, indicating beings to which we can refer by negation or denial, or even indicating beings that are beyond affirmation and denial. A good example of apophatic language applied to God can be found at the beginning of the Anaphora, or Eucharistic Prayer, of Saint John Chrysostom: “for you are God, ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, inconceivable, ever existing, eternally

the same.” The first four adjectives are examples of what is known as “alpha-privatives”: adjectives of denial indicated by the prefix alpha—even the next two adjectival phrases, which are really to be taken as one, in Greek begin with *aei*, eternally, not really an alpha-privative, but which has the effect of including all that is said of God in the apophatic. And it could be said that this accumulation of adjectives expresses confession of God by denial, grammatically, epistemologically, and ontologically.

But the apophatic is never alone: it is always, in Orthodox theology, paired with the kataphatic or affirmative (in other systems of thought the apophatic can stand alone, for instance, in Śaṅkara’s *Advaita Vedānta*, his non-dual interpretation of the Hindu *Vedas*, or nearer to home in Plotinos). This explicit pairing of the kataphatic and the apophatic in theology seems to go back to Proklos, the fifth-century diadochos of the Athenian Academy; it was introduced into Christian theology by Dionysios the Areopagite. This pairing can take different forms. It sometimes seems to be conceived of on the analogy of tacking in sailing, apophatic theology being a kind of qualification of kataphatic theology, affirmations being tempered by negations that keep the thinker on track, as it were.

This seems to me the case with Western, and especially Thomist,

¹ Joseph Famerée, SCJ, “What Might Catholicism Learn from Orthodoxy in Relation to Collegiality?” in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 211–12.

theology, which speaks of “three ways” of knowing God. *Triplex via*: the way of affirmation (or causality), the way of denial or negation, and the way of eminence (*via causalitatis*, *via negationis*, *via eminentiae*). These three ways are easily assimilated to another, much more securely ancient, *triplex via*: purification, illumination, and union. This *triplex via* is based on the Latin version of Dionysios’s *Divine Names* 7.3, which speaks of ascent to God *per causalitatem*, *per remotionem*, *per eminentiam*—mangling the Greek which speaks of our ascent to God “in abstraction and transcendence of all and in the cause of all” (just two ways, which is the burden of the whole of chapter 3 of book 7 of *Divine Names*).² This “three ways” tradition suggests that the way of affirmation (of the cause of the effects) is qualified by abstraction (elsewhere called apophasis, or negation), and finally yields a resolution of “eminence” or transcendence, that is, an affirmation purified by denial.

The predominant Orthodox view of the relationship of kataphatic and apophatic theology respects Dionysios’s Greek, not seeking to resolve the contrast in a supposed *via eminentiae*, but seeing kataphatic theology as *undergirded* by apophatic theology, and thus saving kataphatic theology from itself, from the danger of suggesting that we can come to understand God. In his *Mystical Theology*, Dionysios suggests that we think of kataphatic and apophatic theology as parallel and contrasting movements—the kataphatic descending and the apophatic ascending—“for the higher we ascend, the more our words become more concise, for the intelligible is presented in a more and more synoptic fashion. Now then, as we enter into the darkness that is

beyond the intellect, it is no longer a matter of being concise, but rather of a complete suspension of reason and understanding. And there, where our discourse descends from higher to the lowest it becomes more manifold in proportion to the descent. And now, when we ascend from the lower to the transcendent, the further we ascend the more our words are constrained, and having completed our ascent it will be completely without voice and wholly united to the ineffable.”³ The kataphatic descent from the source of all expresses itself in a more and more wordy fashion, while the ascent to the source of all ends in silent union with the ineffable. The apophatic state of union with the ultimate undergirds the kataphatic explanation in all its wordiness.

Earlier on in this chapter of *Mystical Theology*, Dionysios gives a list of the topics of kataphatic theology, which, stripping them of his deliberately arcane language, amount to the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the incarnation, the divine attributes, and symbolic language applied to God. This makes it evident that the apophatic is far from being the agnostic. It is not that we know nothing about God, but that what we do know about God is undergirded by a conviction that none of our concepts about God can be regarded as absolute; what we deny of God comes closer to the truth than what we can affirm of God; or, put the other way, our knowledge of God is grounded in a silent union with the ineffable.

Dionysios is not in any way exceptional among the fathers of the Church in combining an affirmation of fundamental truths about God—dogmas, as we have come to call them—and denial that we can attain

² Dionysios, *Divine Names* 7.3. Ed. Beate Suchla, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 33 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990), 198, lines 1–2.

³ Dionysios, *Mystical Theology* 3.1033BC. Ed. Adolf Martin Ritter, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 67 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 147, lines 7–10.

exhaustive knowledge of God and the nature of his creation. Gregory the Theologian goes even further, inviting speculation outside the fundamental truth of the Faith: “Speculate about the Universe—or Universes—about Matter, the Soul, about Natures (good and evil) endowed with reason, about the Resurrection, the judgment, Reward and Punishment, or about the Sufferings of Christ. In these questions to hit the mark is not useless, to miss it is not dangerous. But of God himself the knowledge we shall have in this life will be little, though soon after it will perhaps be more perfect.”⁴ Such a view was by no means universal among those who came after Gregory; indeed, it was regarded as dangerously “Origenist,” especially in the context of the dispute in largely monastic circles, known as the Origenist controversy. Indeed, one might maintain that Gregory’s open-minded view about the range of intellectual speculation more and more became a minority view—and increasingly embarrassing, because of Saint Gregory the Theologian’s unquestioned eminence.

What is it, however, that is defined, and to be accepted as absolute? We speak of the “dogmas” of the Christian faith, as defined by the ecumenical councils. These “dogmas,” however, are relatively few: the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the incarnation, also the doctrine of creation (though the refinement “out of nothing” needs clarification, and in the Eastern tradition is not easily summarized by the Latin *ex nihilo*). As is often asserted, there is no doctrine of the atonement, or salvation, defined by the councils (*pace* Professor Anatolios’s plea to the contrary in *Deification through the Cross*),⁵ and there is certainly no *definition* of salvation, no attempt to pass

beyond vivid imagery or compelling analogy (as Anselm required in his *Cur Deus homo?*—“Why did God become human?”). Still, one might maintain that the justification of conciliar dogmas, such as the Trinity and the incarnation, rests on a conviction, deeper than defined dogma, of the reality of salvation. The Greek word *dogma* derives from the verb *dokein*, to seem (to be the case); dogma then is what seems to be the case—to the Church, ultimately declared in a conciliar definition. And that appears something less than absolute.

An early attempt to define *dogma* is found in Saint Basil the Great’s *On the Holy Spirit*, when he contrasts *dogma* with *kerygma*: “Among the doctrines [*dogmata*] and proclamations [*kerygmata*] preserved in the Church, the latter we have from written teaching, while the former we have received from the tradition of the Apostles, handed down to us in a mystery [or: in secret]. Both of these have the same force for our religion.”⁶ The examples Basil gives of “unwritten” traditions (as he goes on to characterize *dogmata*) are all liturgical: the sign of the cross, turning east to pray, the words of the Eucharistic *epiklesis*—these are not derived from any written source, but are based on unwritten traditions. Their meaning is unfolded in actions and the words that accompany them. Basil even goes on to say that the meaning of the actions is often not apparent to those who perform them: “all look to the East in the prayers, but few know that thereby they are seeking the ancient fatherland, Paradise, which God planted in Eden, towards the East.”⁷ What is publicly defined and supported from the Scriptures are the *kerygmata*, the “preachings”; the *dogmata*, equally apostolic, Basil maintains, are what

⁴ Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 27.10. Ed. Paul Gallay, *Sources chrétiennes* 250 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1978), 96. English tr. by Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham, *Popular Patristics* 23 (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2002), 33–34.

⁵ Khaled Anatolios, *Deification through the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), introduction, *passim*.

⁶ Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66. Ed. Benoît Pruche, *Sources chrétiennes* 17 bis (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 478–80.

⁷ Basil, *Holy Spirit* 27.66 (SC, 480).

is implicit in liturgical actions, not clearly defined at all.

This understanding of dogma we find in Saint Basil seems very different from the way dogma is generally understood—both by those who protest the importance of dogma, and those who want to do away with it. That sense of dogma suggests that the Christian faith and doctrine is to be expressed in “dogmas,” defined by the Church in councils (or by popes)—infallibly, or at least indefectibly—to be accepted without question as the authoritative understanding of what God has revealed in Scripture and Tradition: a framework of doctrines that determines what Christians are to believe, even how they are to think. With such a preconception of Christianity as a body of beliefs, freedom of thought might well seem constricted and confined to the point where such freedom is reduced to zero. It would be the religion of the Grand Inquisitor, in Dostoevsky’s tale, where the faithful are relieved of the burden of freedom in return for a religion based on “miracle, mystery, and authority.” In truth, Saint Basil’s view is the reverse of this: it is first of all a free experience of the mystery of God’s engagement with the human, an engagement initiated by God in the incarnation of his Son, the Word of God, an engagement that draws us into the life of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so that we live the divine life, become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). This is an engagement with God that opens up dimensions of what it is to be human that are barely perceived in our fallen human state—dimensions that express what it is to be free, rather than any kind of regimentation imposed by convention, or by signing up to some ideology. Rather, participation in the mystery of God in Christ brings us to

maturity, as “we all come to the unity of the faith and the acknowledgment of the Son of God, to the perfection of humanity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

Basil’s sense of the importance of taking part in symbolic actions in the course of the Liturgy—the sign of the cross, facing east, and so on—is bound up with his sense of our belonging to a symbolic universe, a realm of symbols that point beyond immediate reality, and expressive of what is sometimes called nowadays a “sacramental ontology.” The meaning of such a world is grasped less by beliefs individually maintained, as expressed in symbolic actions and gestures learned from others and expressing a shared sense of the world in which we live, and its values (in a way that anticipates, by a millennium and a half, the insights of social anthropologists such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard).

The place of mystery in Saint Basil’s account of how we participate in the apostolic tradition, in a way that goes beyond what can be set down in writings, as in the Scriptures, corresponds to the place of the apophatic: what we affirm, what we learn, can only be truly understood if we grasp that what we affirm is undergirded by something deeper, which is beyond what can be affirmed, and can only be gestured towards by apophatic denial. Realization of this puts limits on the extent to which we can conceptualize what we believe. The tendency to develop conceptual systems—the temptation of an intellectualized approach to reality—has to be resisted, for concepts are too fragile to capture the nature of reality, let alone the nature of God.

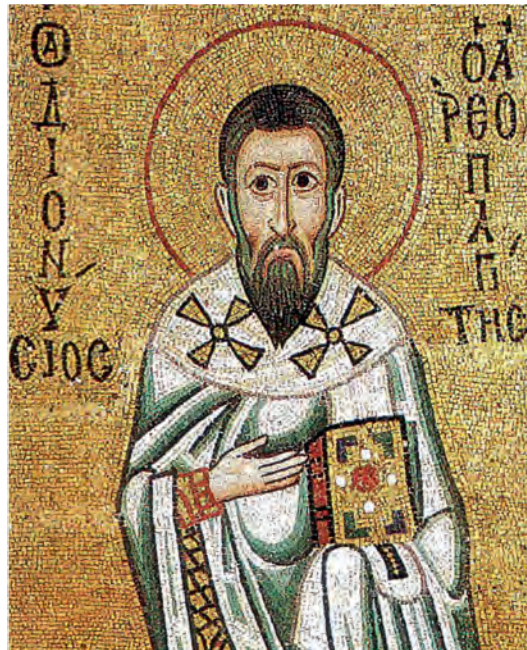
We can see further what this means by the central perception of the two

⁸ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009); *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, 2 vols. (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021).

brilliant works by Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary* and *The Matter with Things*, in which he explores the way in which the division of our brains into two halves, with very different capacities, enables a deeper grasp of the nature of human understanding—of ourselves and of the world, even of God.⁸ The left side of the brain (which operates through the right side of the body) apprehends the world, with a view to manipulating it, focusing on detail, the local, the foreground; it is happier with the familiar; it seeks to narrow things down to certainty; is less self-critical; sees things in isolation, as discrete entities, fragmentary; aims at fixity and stasis, and so on. The right side of the brain (which operates through the left side of the body) seeks to comprehend the world, to understand it as a whole; looks at the whole picture, the global as well as the periphery, the background; is alert to the new; is open to possibility and sustaining ambiguity; is more circumspect; is open to change and flow. The two sides of the brain are meant to work together, complementing each other, but McGilchrist argues that since the sixteenth century, amid rising reliance on the scientific method with its concern for measurability, clarity, and certainty, the left side of the brain has acquired dominance and the right has been side-lined. He asserts that severe consequences for human understanding have resulted from this; in short the loss of what the poet Keats regarded as “negative capability,” that is, “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”⁹

From this point of view one might characterize the lefthand side of the brain as kataphatic and the righthand

side as apophatic, and interpret the cultural experience of the West in last few centuries as manifesting an aphasia of the apophatic, not only isolating the kataphatic, but depriving the kataphatic of its undergirding of the apophatic—this, whether you follow Dionysios or McGilchrist—leading to a dangerous dependence on measure, clarity, and certainty, with consequences profoundly threatening to the whole world, which we diminish



by calling it the “environment,” that is, what surrounds us. We are not witnessing an idiosyncrasy in human awareness, but something much more insidious: a one-sided analysis of the world and our part in it, that protests a certainty based on reason, but sows the seeds of its destruction.

What has this to do with academic freedom? Altogether too much, it seems to me. The academy has lost its sense of balance, seduced by its

St. Dionysios the Areopagite. Mosaic from Monastery of Hosios Loukas, Greece. 11th century.

⁹ *John Keats*, ed. John Barnard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 103.



Salomon de Koninck, *Philosopher with an Open Book*, c. 1650. Louvre Museum.

success in understanding the world, understood within the narrow parameters allowed by the canons of the Enlightenment. Academic freedom depends on a sense of human understanding being conscious of its limitations—not just the limitations of not having (yet) achieved the final synthesis, but limitations inherent in the enterprise of human knowledge—a sense of the finite, a sense of the ease with which human intelligence can be seduced by its success, by its own

brilliance. Once we fail to see that the kataphatic depends on the apophatic (in the way we find in Dionysios); or, put another way, once our sense of knowledge of ourselves and the world loses an awareness that human knowledge is a bit like peering into the darkness with the light of a single torch, so that what is not known, the darkness that surrounds our ray of light, is the more profound—necessarily, not provisionally; or, put the other way about, once our sense of mystery becomes provisional—problems that we cannot solve yet—then we are in serious trouble. We shall see just problems, not mystery; we shall cut ourselves off from the mystery in which we encounter God himself. The real threat to academic freedom comes less from ignorant, over-zealous prelates or hierarchs than from an overweening sense of the power of human intelligence, that thinks that the light it sheds has dispelled the darkness, whereas in our hearts we know that it is in the “deep, but dazzling darkness” of God that we “see not all clear,” but “in him, Might live invisible and dim,” as the great Welsh poet Henry Vaughan put it.¹⁰✱

¹⁰ *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, ed. L. C. Martin, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 523.



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